Insecurity, fuel crisis in Mali spark foreign embassy warnings to leave

BAMAKO: Embassies in Mali urged citizens to leave the country immediately this week while the United States and United Kingdom withdrew non-essential staff, as a fuel blockade by militants upturns daily life and stokes fears of growing insecurity.

Since back-to-back coups in 2020 and 2021, Mali has been ruled by a military junta that is struggling to counter various armed groups, particularly the Al-Qaeda-linked Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), which is carrying out the blockade.

The group has targeted fuel tankers since September, particularly those coming from Senegal and Ivory Coast, through which the majority of Mali's imported goods transit.

The US State Department on Thursday ordered the American embassy's "non-emergency employees and their family members to leave Mali due to safety risks".

The move came two days after the US embassy urged all citizens in the troubled west African nation to "depart immediately" on commercial aircraft.

The British foreign office also said on Thursday that "non-essential British embassy staff have been temporarily withdrawn from Bamako".

It additionally warned its citizens to "leave immediately by commercial flight if you judge it safe to do so".

Italy, Germany, Canada and a handful of other countries have also told their nationals to depart Mali as swiftly as possible.

"The situation is volatile," a diplomatic source said in Bamako.—AFP

Indigenous peoples suffered 'pain' during conquest, Spain admits

MADRID: Spain's Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares on Friday acknowledged the "pain and injustice" inflicted on Indigenous peoples during the Spanish conquest of the Americas, after Mexico renewed calls for an official apology.

Speaking at the opening of the exhibition of Indigenous Mexican art in Madrid, Albares said relations between Spain and Mexico were "a very human story, and like every human story, full of light and shadow.

"There has also been pain — pain and injustice toward Indigenous peoples, to whom this exhibition is dedicated," he added.

"There was injustice — it is only fair to recognize it today, and fair to regret it. Because that is also part of our shared history, and we cannot deny or forget it." The remarks mark one of the clearest acknowledgments by a top Spanish official of the suffering endured by Indigenous communities in the Americas during the colonial era.

For years, the issue was a source of diplomatic tension between the two countries.

In 2019, Mexico's then-president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, sent a letter to Madrid demanding an apology from Spain's monarchy for abuses committed during Spain's 1519-1521 Conquest of Mexico and the ensuing three centuries of colonial rule.—AFP

ROB Jetten, who emerged as the top contender for Dutch premiership after this week's election, speaks to media outside parliament.—Reuters

Centrists beat Wilders party after knife-edge Dutch polls

AMSTERDAM: Dutch centrist party D66 won the most votes in Wednesday's general election, putting its 38-year-old leader Rob Jetten on course to becoming the youngest-ever prime minister in the Netherlands.

With almost all votes counted, pro-EU liberal D66 can no longer be overtaken by the far-right Freedom Party (PVV) led by Geert Wilders.

Jetten claimed victory based on the election body's announcement and urged mainstream parties from the left to the right to unite.

"Voters have clearly indicated the need for cooperation," Jetten told reporters on Friday. "We want to find a majority that will eagerly work on issues such as the housing market, migration, climate and the economy." Wilders did not concede defeat and in a social media post called Jetten "arrogant" for not waiting for the announcement of the final result next week.

Jetten's D66 is now expected to take the lead in a first round of talks to form a coalition government, a process which usually takes months.

With around 18 per cent of the votes, the party will need three coalition partners to reach a simple majority in the 150-seat lower chamber of parliament.

Wilders also called for an investigation into what he said was "a stream" of claims of alleged voter fraud sent to him from sources from all over the country. He said he had no idea whether the reports had substance, but that they should be investigated.

Pacemaker now sets his own pace

As a talented junior athlete, Rob Jetten once ran as a pacemaker for future Olympic champion Sifan Hassan.

Now the 38-year-old is setting his own pace at the head of Dutch politics.

Just like Hassan, who won the Paris Olympic marathon with an astonishing late surge last year, Jetten timed his own political run perfectly.

With a positive message and youthful energy, Jetten dragged the D66 from fifth in the polls with a month to go.

"We've done it," he told jubilant supporters at the election party, on a stage surrounded by a sea of Dutch and European flags.

"We have run a very positive campaign because we want to get rid of all the negativism in the Netherlands over the past few years," he said on election day.

"I want to bring the Netherlands back to the heart of Europe because without European cooperation, we are nowhere," he added.

Jetten has had a head-spinning rise up the political hierarchy.

Entering parliament at the tender age of 30, he became leader of the D66 just a year later, the youngest ever to hold the post.

His carefully rehearsed lines and bookish glasses earned the self-confessed geek the unwelcome nickname of "Robot Jetten" in his early career.

But he shed the glasses after laser eye surgery and adopted a less earnest demeanour that saw him impress in his ubiquitous media appearances during the campaign.

"The best advice I got then was to tell your story as if you were sitting around the table with your mates," he said, referring to the early years. A quirk of the calendar handed Jetten even more positive exposure.

He reached the final of popular TV quiz show *The Smartest Person*, filmed in spring but broadcast in the run-up to election day. —Agencies

China seeks 'trust' with US, but cautions over Taiwan

KUALA LUMPUR: China and the United States should build "trust" in order to coexist, Beijing's defence minister said on Friday, but cautioned Washington about its "words and deeds" on Taiwan.

Dong Jun met US counterpart Pete Hegseth on the sidelines of a Southeast Asian regional defence summit in Malaysia, a day after leaders Xi Jinping and Donald Trump held talks in South Korea.

Trump and Xi did not discuss Taiwan on Thursday, the US president said, but Dong told Hegseth the "unification of the two sides of the Taiwan Strait is an irresistible historical trend", according to a Chinese defence ministry readout.

"The US side should be cautious in its words and deeds on the Taiwan issue and take a clear-cut stance firmly opposing `Taiwan independence'," Dong said.

The Chinese statement also said Dong told Hegseth that their respective defence departments "should take concrete actions to implement the consensus reached by the heads of state".

He said they should also "strengthen policy-level dialogue to enhance trust and dispel uncertainty", and build a bilateral military relationship "characterised by equality, respect, peaceful coexistence and stable positive momentum".

Hegseth described the meeting in the Malaysian capital as "good and constructive".

"I highlighted the importance of maintaining a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and emphasised US concerns about China's activities in the South China Sea, around Taiwan, and towards US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific," Hegseth said in a post on social media platform *X*, using a US term for the Asia-Pacific region.

But he later told journalists: "I said to Admiral Dong as well, our position on Taiwan remains unchanged, and President Trump has said that as well."—AFP

Endangered primates found in checked bag

MUMBAI: Indian customs officers have arrested a plane passenger after discovering two endangered gibbons stuffed inside a checked bag, the latest animals seized from smugglers at Mumbai's airport.

One of the tiny apes from Indonesia was dead, while the other, in a video shared by Indian Customs, was seen cradled in the arms of an officer, softly hooting before covering its face with its arm.

Customs said the passenger, who had travelled from Malaysia via Thailand, was given the rare apes by a wildlife trafficking "syndicate" for delivery in India.

Officers acting on "specific intelligence" arrested the passenger in Mumbai on Thursday.

"A subsequent search of their checked baggage, a trolley bag, led to the discovery and seizure of two Silvery Gibbon (Hylobates moloch), one live and one found dead, which were concealed in a basket," the customs department said. Wildlife trade monitor TRAFFIC, which battles the smuggling of wild animals and plants, warned in June of a "very troubling" trend in trafficking driven by the exotic pet trade.—AFP

Americans worry about next meal as shutdown enters second month

WASHINGTON: The US government shutdown barrelled towards its second month on Friday and the pain is spreading fast — with federal workers broke, food aid vanishing and millions of Americans caught in the crossfire.

What started on Oct 1 as a Washington sideshow has morphed into a slow-motion implosion of public services and a growing economic convulsion, with federal offices dark and President Donald Trump's government stuck in neutral.

Republicans have warned that millions will begin feeling the full force of the shutdown for the first time this weekend, as unresolved fights over funding for health care and food stamps make them hungrier and poorer.

"Most people haven't noticed up until this week. Thanks to Donald Trump finding a way to pay our troops last month, that pain was delayed," Republican House whip Tom Emmer told *Fox News*.

"But, starting this week... this is starting to become very real."

At the heart of the fight is money to help Americans cover health insurance under the Affordable Care Act, better known as Obamacare.

Those subsidies — a lifeline for more than 20 million people — are set to expire at year's end and, unless Congress acts, premiums will skyrocket when the new sign-up period opens on Saturday.

But Washington's warring parties are locked in a familiar, bitter loop, as Democrats refuse to reopen the government without a deal to extend the subsidies and with Republicans saying they won't talk until the lights are back on.

As Washington bickers, the shutdown's fallout is rippling through everyday life and starting to pinch where it really hurts — the dinner table.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programme (SNAP), which helps 42 million low-income Americans buy groceries, is set to run out of funds this weekend.

Democrats have been pushing the White House to use $5 billion in emergency cash to cover food stamps, but the administration says it cannot legally tap that fund.

'Breaking point'

"We are now reaching a breaking point thanks to Democrats voting no on government funding now 14 different times," House Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters.

"You're going to have real people, real families — you're going to have children — who will go hungry beginning this weekend," he added.

With no end to the shutdown in sight, the deadlines are piling up fast.

A food aid programme for pregnant women, new mothers and infants is also on the brink, while programmes that provide nutrition and family support to 65,000 infants could begin shuttering from Saturday.

The administration says it has scraped together enough money to cover payday for active-duty troops, but acknowledges that they could go unpaid by mid-November.

Some 670,000 federal workers have been sent home without pay, and another 730,000 — from park rangers — to air traffic controllers — are working for nothing. Many missed their entire pay for the first time this week.

The country's largest federal workers' union, AFGE, is begging Congress to pass a stopgap bill to get pay cheques flowing again. But even that has become political quicksand, with Democrats holding the line.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS

YAOUNDE: Issa Tchiroma Bakary, nominated as a presidential candidate by Cameroon's National Salvation Front, poses for a picture at his home on Aug 25. Bakary, who claims victory in the presidential election last week, asserted on Friday that he is under the "protection" of a faction of the army. —AFP

TAUNGGYI: Revellers prepare to release a sheep-shaped hot air balloon during a lighting festival in Myanmar's Shan state.—AFP

BALI: Jos Dharmawan, a collector of vintage cars, shows a glimpse of his collection to young Indonesians. From the 1948 Plymouth owned by Indonesia's first lady, Fatmawati, to a blue American-made Ford Model T from 1917, Dharmawan has hundreds of cars that speak to an Indonesia before and after Dutch rule ended at the end of World War Two.—AFP

A PASTORALIST offers milk from a container to a calf after milking camels at dawn in an enclosed pen.—AFP

Camels replace cows as Kenya battles drought

SAMBURU: Sitting on the edge of a nearby well, Chapan Lolpusike recounted how his cows and oxen "all died" following the worst drought in four decades, oblivious to the dry riverbed in northern Kenya, where it hasn't rained since April, caused by a succession of poor rainfall in 2021 and 2022.

After that, the herder made a sweeping change. "We no longer have cattle at home. We only raise camels," said Lolpusike, a member of the semi-nomadic Samburu community.

Camels can graze on dry grasses, go more than a week without water, and produce up to six times more milk than cattle — making them an increasingly necessary option in northern Kenya, an area particularly vulnerable to climate change.

Samburu County officials launched a camel program in 2015, following several droughts that had killed off at least 70 percent of the cattle in Kenya's arid and semi-arid regions.

Around 5,000 Somali camels — a larger and more productive breed than the native herd -- have since been distributed, including 1,000 in the last year.

The goal is for every family in the county to have their own, said village administrator James Lolpusike.

"If the drought persists, the cattle will not be anywhere anymore," he said.

Camel herds are at high risk of disease that could lead to losses.

But there are clear, positive changes as they become a regular sight in the region, including healthier children, said the village administrator.—AFP

NEW YORK CITY: Zohran Mamdani, the Democratic candidate for mayor, performs Tai Chi while campaigning at a senior centre in Manhattan.—Reuters

BANDA ACEH: A member of Indonesia's disaster agency sprays disinfectant at a school to prevent the spread of bird flu.—AFP